

## New and Improved Conservation District Elections Are Here

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OLYMPIA — People who vote in grass-roots conservation district elections are selecting leaders to help improve Washington's natural resources.

Elections occur in January, February and March to select citizens who direct local conservation activities in Washington State's 47 conservation districts.

Issues that surfaced last year have resulted in substantial changes to conservation district election procedures, according to the Washington State Conservation Commission.

"The most visible situation was in the Clallam Conservation District where vague eligibility rules confused candidates and voters," said Tom Salzer, the Commission's lead for conservation district elections.

"When we looked more deeply at that situation, we uncovered procedures that needed to be fixed. Our 70-year-old process allowed election of candidates who may be ineligible to serve and who may not be known to all voters."

Last April, the Conservation Commission held a public hearing in Port Angeles to hear about election problems directly from citizens. "We heard two clear messages: it's unfair to voters to not know who all the candidates are, and it's unfair to elect someone if that person may not be eligible to serve," said Mark Clark, Executive Director of the Commission.

The Conservation Commission then convened a work group to identify opportunities to improve conservation district elections.

Under the old procedure, candidates could run as unannounced write-ins. If a write-in candidate was elected, the conservation district would then determine if the person was eligible to hold the office.

The revised procedure requires all candidates to file with the conservation district at least four weeks before election day. Conservation districts determine eligibility of candidates before election day.

"The result of this major change is there can be no secret, unannounced candidates, and every candidate will have been found to be eligible to serve by the time citizens cast their votes," said Clark.

The Conservation Commission also clarified eligibility rules regarding land ownership and operation of a farm. By state law, three of the five conservation district board members must own land or be a farm operator.

"Our procedures were not clear enough about owning land or running a farm," said Salzer. "This year, candidates who claim to be a farmer must operate farm or agricultural land as defined in RCW 89.08.020. This requirement applies on the day of filing, and if elected, throughout the three-year term of office."

The Conservation Commission also increased the minimum time polls must be open so citizens will have more opportunity to vote.

Conservation districts and the Washington Association of Conservation Districts helped the Conservation Commission rewrite the election procedures, and the Commission formally adopted the revisions last November.

"We believe these changes benefit everyone. Candidates will know whether they are eligible. Conservation districts will know who all the candidates are. Voters will know all candidates have been found to be eligible for the office of conservation district supervisor. Citizens will know the process to select their local conservation leaders was fair and open," said Salzer.

The Conservation Commission expects to review the election procedures again before engaging in rulemaking on this subject. "We may have to delay writing rules on elections because we are cutting costs, but we remain committed to making certain that qualified people may run for office, and anyone eligible to vote will have the opportunity to vote," said Clark.

More information about conservation district elections is available online at <http://www.scc.wa.gov/elections>

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